

## Book Review

Liebreich, Karen. *The Black Page: Interviews with Nazi Film-Makers*. UK: McHugh Publications, 2017.

For those interested in propaganda and its use as a tool for political power, the paradigm case to examine is the German National Socialist regime (hereafter the Nazi Regime). Most other governments—even democratic ones—use propaganda. Perhaps some other totalitarian regimes have matched the power and deceitfulness of the Nazi Regime, but I daresay none has surpassed it.

Karen Liebreich's *The Black Page* is a gem of a book that helps us to understand how many of the key players in Nazi cinema felt about their work in retrospect. The book is based upon her personal interviews (conducted in the 1990s) with a number of actors, directors, critics, cameramen, and so on. It is remarkable that of the Nazi film industry players alive fifty years after World War II ended so many agreed to talk with her. She includes sixteen of these interviews in the book. These include, most notably, ones with: Wilfred von Oven, press officer to Joseph Goebbels; Fritz Hippler, director of the Reich's Film Department; Hans-Otto Meissner, Diplomat; Hans Feld, film critic; and Kristina Soderbaum, actress (the heroine in *Jew Suss* [1940]).

The Nazi Regime put special weight on cinema as a medium of propaganda. Goebbels, the Regime's propaganda minister—with his training in literature—held film to be second only to radio in its propagandistic potential. As he put it, "We are convinced that in general film is one of the most modern and far-reaching methods of influencing the masses. A regime must not allow film to go its own way" (pp. 8-9). Adolf Hitler—with his early interest in becoming an artist—wrote cynically in *Mein Kampf*, "The mass of the people as such is lazy. The picture in all its forms up to the film has greater possibilities. Here a man needs to use his brains even less. It suffices to look . . . and thus many will more readily accept a pictorial presentation than read an article of any length. The picture brings them in a much briefer time, I might say at one stroke" (pp. 7-8). It is no surprise, then, to find that the Nazi Regime produced during its twelve-year reign nearly 1,100 films, which is almost two releases per week. It exploited the cover of film to indoctrinate the young by installing film projectors in 70,000 schools in the first two years alone and making film showings mandatory at Hitler Youth meetings (p. 16).

Two of the interviews warrant special discussion. First, von Oven's is a fascinating interview. He was Goebbels's press secretary for the last two years of the war, after which he (like so many other Nazis) immigrated to Argentina. He there set up a German-language newspaper and wrote for it as well as for a number of other extreme right-wing publications. Von Oven told Liebreich that Goebbels only informed him of the existence of the death camps shortly before the end of the war; while he didn't overtly deny the Holocaust, he scoffed at the claim that six million Jews were killed (p. 26). He also told Liebreich that the war started when Polish Jews massacred 5,800 German civilians in the city of Bromberg (p. 25). (In reality, the Germans had invaded Poland two days before. It is arguable that the German civilians were killed by "friendly fire," that is, accidentally killed by German troops firing upon retreating Polish troops.<sup>1</sup>)

Regarding Goebbels, von Oven said that Goebbels was arrogant, but was intelligent and knew more about film than most people. Von Oven was able to shed some light on Goebbels's theory of propaganda. Goebbels held that propaganda should be kept simple and geared to the slowest people, and used the analogy of a convoy, which "must adjust its speed to suit the slowest ship" (p. 27). Moreover, Goebbels insisted that he didn't want "didactic" films, but rather, propaganda conveyed through entertainment films.

Also illuminating is the brief interview with Hippler in his house overlooking Berchtesgaden. Besides being the head of the Nazi film department, Hippler was the director of the infamous anti-Semitic "documentary" *The Eternal Jew* (1940). The film attacks Jews in a number of ways and at the grossest of levels (as being physically repellant, culturally inferior, and dangerous in their alleged thirst for control). Hitler wanted the film to push the idea that Jews form a parasitic race. Goebbels approved the initial film takes, writing in his (Goebbels's) diary that the scenes were "horrific and brutal" and supported his view that Jewry must be "eliminated" (p. 66). Liebreich concludes the interview by noting that Hippler was still an ardent supporter of the Nazi Regime's ideology.

Two main points emerge from reading this book. First, Goebbels greatly favored film that purveyed the Nazi Regime's message opaquely, that is, disguised as pure entertainment. As he put it

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<sup>1</sup> "Bloody Sunday (1939)," Wikipedia, accessed online at: [http://nlp.cs.nyu.edu/meyers/controversial-wikipedia-corpus/english-html/main/main\\_0089.html](http://nlp.cs.nyu.edu/meyers/controversial-wikipedia-corpus/english-html/main/main_0089.html).

in 1942, the ideal film would be 80% entertainment and 20% propaganda (p. 8). Certainly, the most effective propaganda movies the Regime produced were entertainment features. In the case of the major Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda films, arguably the least effective was *The Eternal Jew*, which was the only one made as a documentary. It wasn't nearly as effective as *Jew Suss*.<sup>2</sup>

Second, it is astounding that after nearly a half-century since the Nazi Regime ended with Germany in total ruins and the revelation of the death camps that killed eleven million people, “Only one or two of our interviewees showed any sign of self-awareness or self-doubt about their contribution to the success of the regime” (p. 13). Indeed, some of the Nazi film-makers—including Hibbler, Meissner, and von Oven—were completely unrepentant. Such people are difficult to explain. Are they delusional? Is the narcissism that characterizes so many in the film industry just especially deep in them? Is this the ultimate in cognitive dissonance? This puzzle is outside of the realm of propaganda studies; it can be answered only by psychiatry.

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<sup>2</sup> For a review of both of these movies, see Gary James Jason, “Selling Genocide II: The Later Films,” *Reason Papers* vol. 39, no. 1 (Summer 2017), pp. 97-123.

